ENGR 408

EDxPSU

x = independently organized TED event

Alien Culture

Decrypting the Twitter Phenomenon in a Control Volume

Matthew Raymond Steiner

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Introduction

When I first read the description for this paper on ANGEL to "do something you have never imagined doing/participating/talking about before", I brainstormed for days searching for a topic. I began writing papers that I ended up deleting after a page or so in. Very frustrated, and close to the deadline, I could not find a culture that I could never imagine myself doing. Finally, the day before the paper was due, I was seated at the TEDxPSU event, and I kept hearing other attendees talk about Twitter. Of course I knew about Twitter. I even had an account from a year ago out of curiosity, but I was vehemently opposed to broadcasting small snippets of my thoughts to the internet for others to read and archive. As the event continued, Dean Christian Brady referenced "tweets" and announced that the most insightful tweet in the audience would win a brand-new HP® netbook. With laptops, iPad's, netbooks, Blackberry's, and iPhone's clicking all around me on Twitter, I realized that I was amidst an alien culture that I could embrace to help me write this paper. As shown in Figure 1 below, I took a survey of the device used as described by Twitter's software listed under each post to get an understanding up what devices people were using

to keep in touch with TEDxPSU during Sessions 2 and 3 of the seminar. It became evident that

computers were the vast reaching medium "tweeting" on Schwab Auditorium's wireless internet.
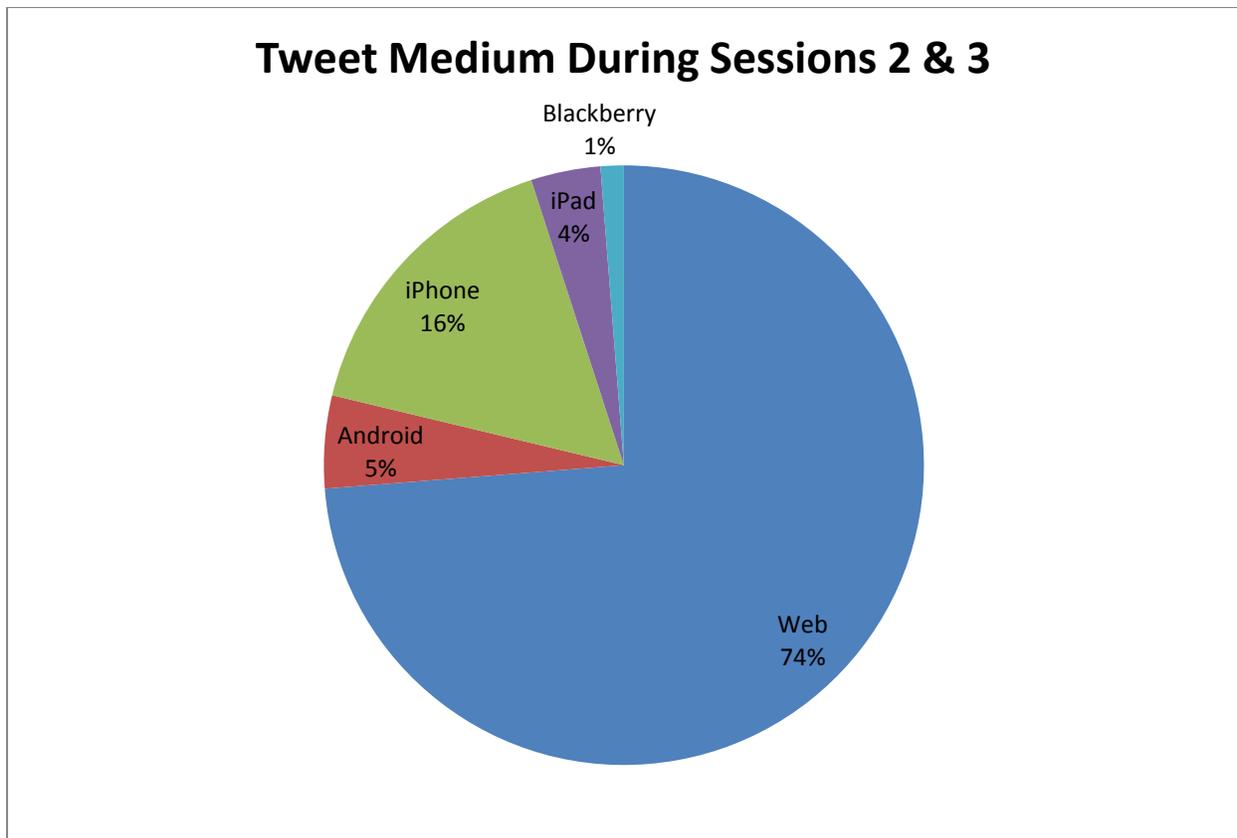
Tweet Medium During Sessions 2 & 3

Figure 1: *With a sample size of n=80 tweets, I gathered that netbooks, Macbooks, and PCs overwhelmingly were the #TEDxPSU posters during the second and third sessions of speakers at the event.*

Why Twitter?

Twitter emerged as the obvious alien culture because I believe I would attend any salsa-

dancing club happily, or go rock-climbing, but I would never willingly post my thoughts to a public

forum seemingly out of my social anxiety. The challenge to post my thoughts, without the shroud

of anonymity, to a public "wall" of Twitter postings about TEDxPSU prompted me to step outside

of my fear of judgment. And so, I immersed myself in this culture of bloggers as I "tweeted" my

thoughts during the entire event.

I was enticed to choosing Twitter as a culture, because I believe that social-media products are forming a culture that is not defined by a predominant race or gender, but defined by technologically savvy people who wish to be connected constantly to their friends' thoughts and do so with these short "tweets". If I simply searched the "hashtag" #TEDxPSU on my Android phone, I instantly yielded ten to twenty "tweets" per minute of dialogue between guests conversing about the current act on stage. I became bombarded with tweets and keeping up with the Twitter feed as well as the speaker themselves became increasingly overwhelming.

Hashtags were just the beginning of how alien I was to the language of Twitter. I quickly engaged a few bloggers around me in the room to the nuances of sayings like "RT" which stands for re-tweet. Learning the language helped me not only contribute to the tweeting about TEDxPSU, but also helped me understand what others were saying in their own tweets. Before Sunday, I had only used my phone for texting and email, but contrary to my prior convictions, I liked being directly connected to the social environment of TED without even leaving my seat.

Feelings of the Encounter

Entering into a wall that looks similar to Figure 2 is not easily interpretable to even the most fluent of the English language at first glance. My feelings until I started to really understand the nuances of the tweeting language were similar as my feelings were before this event, "Why would anyone want to do this?" But the act of releasing preconceptions against Twitter had a weighty outcome on my means of communication as the day progressed.
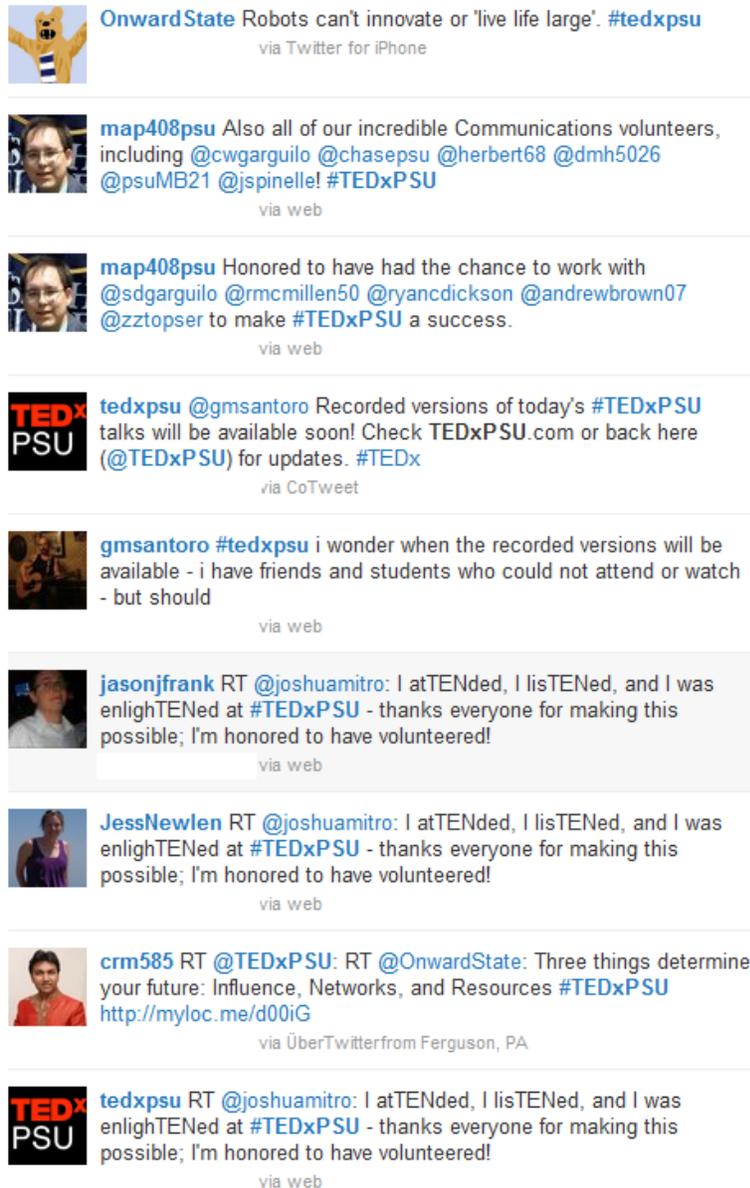
Figure 2: *Screen shot from the Twitter "wall" for #TEDxPSU during the third speaker session of the day.*

By embracing Twitter, the "visit" into this social-media realm was strangely fulfilling. The speakers vastly engaged the audience, and I was able to see unrestricted communal reaction in real-time right on my phone. It felt like being texted individually by each and every member of the audience. Of course, the learning curve for Twitter took me the greater half of the morning, but true understanding of the Twitter community, coupled with a technologically affable atmosphere like TEDxPSU, I could not have asked for a better way to test this social-media outlet I labeled as was

outright worthless. The most enjoyable parts were seeing tweets of each lecturer such as Dean Brady, the host of the event, explaining tricky references he made on stage. By the end of the lecture, it was almost as thought provoking and stimulating to study the banter on the "wall" as listening to the speakers themselves.

Values Embedded Within the Culture

I knew finding the core values of a digital culture would be my most intricate challenge of the day when I chose TEDxPSU's Twitter as a culture. I quickly noticed a value of respect which I admired. Even in subtle criticisms of speakers with an awkward speaking presence, such as DJ Earworm, the audience's reactions were positive and encouraging. This constructive environment coupled with TED's enlightening take on the infusion of ideas into the minds of the attendees placed me in a comforting ecosystem that I never realized Twitter could present.

I also noticed a distinct nature of the Twitter users within the room to grasp for quotes within the speech that stood out. Finding, re-tweeting quotes others posted, and commenting on the individual quotes became a viral phenomenon when a presenter said something insightful. And as I looked into this, I saw a divide of values from particular users. Some users were looking for that one sentence that could sum up an entire speech to tweet, where other users were more on commenting on the themes and motifs of the lecturers. This divide made two groups discussions on the Twitter feed, and really for the first time presented a dichotomy of the digital aesthetic of the tweet. People from each faction almost communicated exclusively with each other, which I found oddly peculiar, because the value for intellectual conversation was ever-present, but the theme of specific quotes to wide-ranging conclusions of the lecture made a separation of the group that I found attention-grabbing.

Preconceived Affirmations

I believe many of my preconceived notions of the Twitter audience were confirmed. For instance, before knowing much of the Twitter culture, I believed it to lack content in limiting users to 160 character tweets. Most of what I saw on the wall was short quotes, quick links, sentence-long opinions, but nothing incredibly ample. But, I believe that the shortcoming of my preconceptions was underestimating the vastly simple social environment Twitter provides. It was less about what each person what saying, but more about who they were saying it to, and in reference to what. When all users were focused on specific lecturers and experiencing the same stimulants, Twitter went from irrelevant to very functional in a short-period of time in my mind. I began to not only empathize with the culture, but to recognize that I was entirely wrong about Twitter fundamentally.

Twitter affirmed my conclusions before I recognized its usefulness in context of TEDxPSU. It was a social medium to interact with not only other audience members, but speakers, and people watching via television feed. In a control volume with almost no flow in or out of the room, all we had to communicate that was not inappropriate was our handheld devices, laptops, and smart-phones. And by using these technologies, the room had an ongoing conversation for well over 300 minutes with perspectives widely ranging from person to person. TEDxPSU's goal of enlightenment was both attained through speakers and through discussion in the computing cloud. This discussion's relevance gave credence to the usefulness of Twitter in situations, and turned some of my preconceptions around 180 degrees.

Reflections and New Thoughts

This experience has not necessarily made me become a daily-user of Twitter, but I can now see the usefulness of the product. In an engineering leadership role, I can see where fast

communication among large groups of mobile users could be a great benefit if correctly used. And this experience made me think of an intra-office Twitter system that was classified but could allow workers working remotely, with clients, in laboratories to quickly relay small opinions or comments that could inspire ideas or generate large-scale information flow within a large-scale company that email could never provide. When I began to ponder on not only the usefulness of Twitter, I not only disproved my old adages to myself, but began to think of the possibilities of software with similar capabilities could do to enhance communication in a fast-paced engineering company.

Similarly, I do not think my ideas generated will work with Twitter due to sensitivity of information, but I do believe conceptually Twitter is a beautiful concept. It is faster than email, concise, and mobile-friendly in a world where being tied down to a laptop computer is becoming less and less common. That being said, my personal observation is that outside of my very acute experience, Twitter seems to be very "spam-like" in my opinion. Finding the good information among all of the posted links and commentary can sometimes be burdensome, as even long-time Twitter users admitted at TEDxPSU. For that reason, I do not see myself staying as embedded as I was at the event, but may check in from time to time to keep myself aware of the evolving technology.

Engineering Leadership Connection

Last, I wanted to draw connections of my social-media experience into contemporary engineering leadership. Social-media is a phenomenon that slowly moves towards the professional industry as more and more workers grew up using MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other outlets to communicate with friends. Employees become increasingly worried employers investigate these pages, and use them less as a function of these fears. I believe that there will be a place for social-media in the workplace once it becomes both practical and functional. What I learned about

Twitter can be applied in many cases in large team projects scaling multiple engineering centers for a global engineering firm. While software supporting this has come and failed in products like Google Wave and various Adobe products, widely used software to connect intra-business workers can both boost worker morale and maybe produce a digital cross-cultural standard that Facebook has almost achieved online today.

Leaders in both business and engineering will not only need basic knowledge of these software as they develop, but thorough understanding to be at the cusp of innovation to bring into their businesses and to not only follow once all competitors have followed suit. I believe leaders not only make themselves aware of rising technologies, but make others aware and move their organizations to embrace them.

This project made me more responsive to comprehending a technology's ability before dismissing it as useless. Twitter sometimes is labeled as a "spam-like" social networking tool, but I believe this experience proved its use it connecting gifted thinkers.